



Presentation

Denise Merkle

Volume 22, numéro 2, 2e semestre 2009

Littérature comparée et traductologie littéraire : convergences et divergences
Comparative Literature and Literary Translation Studies: Points of Convergence and Divergence

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044821ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/044821ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Merkle, D. (2009). Presentation. *TTR*, 22(2), 9–21.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/044821ar>

Presentation

Denise Merkle

The articles grouped in this issue of *TTR* reflect on the relationship between Comparative Literature and *literary* Translation Studies from various angles and come to different, yet ultimately complementary, conclusions. Should literary translation studies “become the heart of comparative literature?” is a question initially posed by Lieven D’hulst (2007, p. 103) in a seminal essay, written in response to Emily Apter’s call to expand the “translation zone” in Comparative Literature (2006), her answer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s pronouncement of the death of Euro- and US-centric Comparative Literature (2003). The question will be echoed in his contribution to this issue as well as in Patricia Godbout’s and Jean-Marc Gouanvic’s contributions in particular. In general terms, the question is considered from the points of view of two multilingual countries and two continents: a European perspective is provided thanks to the contributions of two Belgian scholars and a North American perspective thanks to contributions penned by Québécois and English-Canadian scholars. Furthermore, disciplinary approaches diverge and converge. Two papers are written by scholars often associated as much with comparative literary studies as with literary Translation Studies: K.U. Leuven’s Lieven D’hulst and Université de Sherbrooke’s Patricia Godbout. The authors of three contributions are associated first and foremost with literary Translation Studies: Concordia’s Jean-Marc Gouanvic, McGill’s Gillian Lane-Mercier and K.U. Leuven’s Reine Meylaerts, while Brock University’s Jane Koustas and Mount Allison University’s Glen Nichols, a theatre translator in his own right, are known for their innovative contributions to Canadian literary studies through their work on translation.

A corollary to nineteenth-century European nation building, Comparative Literature ostensibly set out to determine what distinguished one national culture from another as expressed through their respective literary production. Nineteenth-century comparatists expected to learn more about their national literature by comparing it to foreign national literatures read in their respective languages. Fearful of the filter of translation, especially gatekeeping, they understood that direct access to a foreign culture was afforded by reading a nation's textual products in the original language. In fact, a school of comparatist thought holds that literary works must be studied in the original language by those comparatists who have mastered it.

However, the traditional comparatist nation-state paradigm, i.e., nation equals a geographical territory, one language and one culture, does not necessarily hold in a post-colonial world marked by multilingualism and hybridity. As a case in point, the government of Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently recognized (in 2006) the existence of the Québécois nation within the Canadian state. Moreover, Acadians consider themselves to be a nation, along with Canada's numerous First Nations. A good many modern states are in fact officially multilingual and multicultural, their identity plural: Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, the Faroe Islands, Finland, India, Ireland, Norway, South Africa, Switzerland, and so on. The valorisation of minority and hybridity has turned traditional Comparative Literature studies on its ear, so to speak. Having lost its anchor, Comparative Literature is looking for meaning in new areas, including translation, to the point of wondering whether translated literature should not be the discipline's central object of study.

Whereas the study of Comparative Literature is a product of nineteenth-century European nationalism and identity affirmation, Translation Studies has developed in the aftermath of nationalism gone awry during the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than compare national literatures in order to identify the locus of difference and establish boundaries to separate national identities (and the image they project) as well as better understand the politics of cultural influence, Translation Studies was, at least in part, and perhaps especially in the

Canadian context, born of the desire to mediate difference, better understand how difference (even conflict) can be negotiated, and build bridges in order to improve understanding of the other, especially from the point of the view of the person who is central to this activity, the translator. Two universities come immediately to mind when we think of comparative literary studies and translation in the Quebec/Canadian context: the Université de Sherbrooke referred to by Patricia Godbout in her contribution to this issue and the University of Alberta. In the Canadian context in particular, as Patricia Godbout cogently argues, translation and Translation Studies have played a key role (with)in comparative literary studies.

In "D. G. Jones, poète, comparatiste et traducteur," Godbout examines Douglas Gordon Jones' original contribution to the field of Comparative Canadian Literature through his work at the Université de Sherbrooke, located in Quebec's Eastern Townships, in the aftermath of the crisis in Comparative Literature that broke out in the late 1950s. The examination of D. G. Jones' contribution is put in the context of the debate surrounding the place of translation in Comparative Literature. The most "vocal debaters" appear to have been Haskell Block, René Wellek and René Étiemble. With detailed reference to Block's and Wellek's writings, Godbout explains that the idea of a crisis in Comparative Literature is not new and that, in fact, the culmination of the second International Comparative Literature Association congress held at Chapel Hill in 1958 was Wellek's attack against French Comparative Literature methodology, especially its emphasis on the study of "influence." Étiemble expounded upon a number of Wellek's ideas in *Comparaison n'est pas raison : La crise de la littérature comparée* (1963), as well as affirming that the art of translation tends to be neglected by comparatists, a position against which Block would argue in 1970, himself maintaining that comparatists should not study translation or translated literature. However, like André Gide, Étiemble believed that comparatists should contribute to their own literary system by translating great literary works produced by foreign writers, which, obviously, would oblige them to learn foreign languages. Comparative Literature could, even should, take up the task of training competent translators, in his

opinion; furthermore, the comparative study (textual analysis) of translations was to be encouraged. According to Godbout, Étiemble opened the door to Translation Studies within and beyond Comparative Literature. The author adds the important distinction that the object of study of Translation Studies is not so much translated literature as the translation process and its effects.

Starting in the 1960s, Jones walked through the door opened by Étiemble. He combined his work as poet, translator and Translation Studies scholar to formulate a response to the Quiet Revolution and the tensions it generated. He wished to demonstrate that first literary translation and later Translation Studies were and are an essential component of comparative Canadian literature. Godbout concludes by affirming that Jones proved that comparative approaches, far from being poorly adapted to contemporary Translation Studies were, on the contrary, able to improve and enrich our understanding of numerous literary and translation practices in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada.

Two decades later, in Western Canada, the Comparative Literature Research Institute of the University of Alberta decided to hold a series of colloquia between 1986 and 1990 that would study the Canadian literary institution as a socio-historical phenomenon. The first colloquium, held in 1988, was devoted to problems of literary reception. Itamar Even-Zohar gave the keynote conference in which he insisted on the importance of a polysystemic and polychronic approach to the study of literary systems that involve cultures in contact. E. D. Blodgett (1988) added that the interest of the polysystem concept for a multilingual country lies in its recognition of the potential existence of multiple literary systems composed each of sub-systems, one of which may be translation. He also acknowledged the usefulness of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the literary field in a multicultural context. Unfortunately, lack of funding made the scheduled colloquium on translation within the Quebec/Canadian literary institution impossible. The "Alberta" model apparently subsumes translation and literary Translation Studies under Comparative Literature, much like the Sherbrooke model.

More critical of Anglophone reception of Franco-Canadian alterity in their respective studies, Jane Koustas and Glen Nichols demonstrate that in the Canadian context at least, a number of, in particular, Anglophone scholars seem to have reduced their essentially comparative studies, and to a lesser extent, their studies of literary translations, to assimilating difference through the filter of ethnocentric translation in what appears, at least in some cases, to be an ideological project of nation building. Here nation is still tinged with the idea of “oneness” that marks traditional comparative approaches, despite the country’s official bilingualism and biculturalism. Let it be recalled that followed by “with,” “compare” examines two like things in order to discern their similarities and differences. When the emphasis of comparative studies is placed on likening two things one with another, scholars will be guided by an approach marked by seeking out the recognizable and the familiar in the other, rather than searching out and highlighting difference.

Jane Koustas compellingly argues that Canadian comparatists have neglected translation in their otherwise in-depth comparative studies of Quebec and Canadian literatures. In “A Glimpse from the Chambord Staircase,” Koustas explores the image of the Château de Chambord’s spiral staircase that offers an interesting perspective from which to consider the dynamics of Canadian translation into English and Comparative Literature. “While both aim to offer, at the very least, a privileged glimpse of the Other, the interaction between the two [...] suggests a lack of interplay [...] in spite of the high profile of some of the players, such as Philip Stratford, who was heavily invested in both.” Her study considers “the importance accorded to translation in two studies of Comparative Literature in the Canadian context,” Philip Stratford’s *All the Polarities* and Marie Vautier’s *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*. Koustas concludes that their interest in translation is often limited to “fleeting glances.” Canadian comparatists perhaps “miss the poetry, mechanics and contribution of the translation experience [...] in their rush [...] to the bottom line of similarities, to the reduction of two texts to one common language, heading in one direction down the staircase.”

Glen Nichols' conclusion, while similar to that of Koustas, differs in that he argues that in addition to Comparative Literature scholars, Translation Studies scholars are also often guilty of "reducing two texts to one common language." In "When the Same isn't Similar: Herménégilde Chiasson in English," Nichols concludes his paper by affirming that "the comparative reading of [Chiasson's] texts is not significantly differentiated by choosing Translation Studies or Comparative Literature approaches, but rather by pursuing performative systemic potentials rather than traditional binary models." Nichols puts his finger on a concern shared by a number of Translation Studies scholars concerning the inherently assimilating objective of binary positioning (see Gouanvic (2006) and Meylaerts in this issue). The issue is not whether "Comparative Literature is poisoned by translation" or whether "Translation Studies does not need Comparative Literature," but whether the critic is aware of and able to comprehend cultural differences in order to avoid the tendency to create unity where there is none.

Whereas Koustas considers the highly problematic reduction of a translated text and an indigenous literary product to one common language and culture through her study of the reception of francophone alterity in the English translations of Gabrielle Roy's novels that appropriate the Franco-Manitoban writer, essentially transforming her into an Anglo-Canadian writer, Nichols refers to the universalisation of the regional, specifically Acadian, particularism through editorial practices and translation. Though the perspective may be different, the result is the same. Like Roy, Chiasson is appropriated by the Anglo-Canadian majority and transformed into a target system writer. To Nichols then, "Whether comparative work is done on "comparable" texts in one or multiple languages [...] or across translations of a text in multiple languages, upholding the Comparative Literature [versus] Translation Studies debate at the expense of seeing the more systemic issues that are common to both fields is to risk missing the point and lose our time in disciplinary furniture arranging." Koustas' and Nichols' thought-provoking papers come together to plead for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, whether within Comparative Literature or Translation Studies.

Reine Meylaerts fortuitously picks up on Nichols' call to move beyond "traditional binary models" in "Les relations littéraires au-delà des oppositions binaires : national et international, traduit et non traduit," where she argues convincingly for a 21st-century approach to Translation Studies that loosens the artificial constraints of binarisms in order for Translation Studies to become the *new* comparatism (and obviously not the "new comparatism" that Spivak (2003) had in mind). Yet, for Translation Studies to do so, it will have to rethink binary models in light of the new world order marked by plurality and hybridity. With reference to the multilingual Belgian context where translation is a fundamental component of the country's literary systems, Meylaerts exposes a typology of literary relationships where plural literary systems with autonomous institutions share a common geographical space and interact in complex, hierarchical and dynamic ways. In principle, a multilingual culture is a reservoir of multifaceted and unlimited literary relationships. Yet, in practice, the concrete articulation of these relationships is subject to the power dynamics that impact on the multilingual culture's languages and literatures. Meylaerts advocates a socio-institutional approach that would make it possible to predict the types of interactions that are likely to occur along a continuum with, at one extreme, the monolingual dominant culture and, at the other, the monolingual dominated culture. However, given that her approach and case study are anchored in the realities of a post-nation-state socio-political system, they also oblige Translation Studies to redefine some key concepts, starting with "source" and "target." As the example of Flemish literature in the Belgian system demonstrates, a number of literary practices are specific to multilingual and multicultural contexts, and thus lead one to reconsider the pertinence of making categorical binary distinctions.

The simple fact is that in multilingual cultures, different zones, some monolingual and some plurilingual, are found side by side and may overlap. Meylaert's three-category typology attempts to come to terms with this complex reality: 1) A monolingual category encompassing the linguistic and cultural majority that dominates the complex literary system. This group often simply does not acknowledge the existence of minority

groups and their hybridity. 2) A monolingual category that encompasses the minority group. This situation is the product of heightened tensions between the dominant and dominated groups and results from the dominated group having internalised a sense of inferiority with respect to the dominant group. Striving to achieve institutional autonomy, the latter group refuses all interaction with the dominant linguistic and cultural group. 3) A plurilingual category composed of members of the minority group who have internalized without resistance the superiority of the dominant language and culture and who encourage the translation of their works into the dominant language. Members of this group are not in theory opposed to translating the literary products of the dominant culture into the minority language. However, since they master both languages, they tend to read the dominant group's literature in the original language. The members of this group participate actively in the creation of an interculture.

By moving beyond traditional binary models and appreciating the extent to which concepts are tied to culturally-specific perceptions, the new comparatism, i.e., Translation Studies, will be able to find adaptable definitions for the concepts of text, discourse, source culture, target culture, and so on. Adaptable definitions will help free us from stereotypical representations and from the tendency to reductionism or universalisation. This is especially important when we consider that conceptualizing is a function of the (inter)cultural agents' internalisation of institutional structures through their positions and positioning in the source and target cultures.

Yet not only the new world order shows the potential for a "new comparatism," for the traditional nation-state paradigm, as well, can lend support for looking beyond simplistic binarisms in the aim of coming to a better understanding of the transfer processes that are at the heart of the translation experience, as Jean-Marc Gouanvic so aptly argues. Referring specifically to Bourdieu's concept of "field," Gouanvic examines the positions and positioning of intercultural agents in the source and target cultures in "Les déterminants traductifs dans les champs source et cible : le cas du roman policier traduit de l'américain en français en *Série Noire* après 1945." The two cultures in question,

the United States and France, fall under the traditional nation-state paradigm of a single unified nation, one language and one culture, and serve as a backdrop to Gouanvic's analysis of the, at times, tense relationship between Comparative Literature and Translation Studies. Gouanvic sets out to clarify what sets the disciplines apart by analysing the case of the American detective novel transferred into the French culture from 1945 onwards for the *Série Noire* (Gallimard). After examining the *habitus* of the source-text authors, Gouanvic analyses how the French translator acclimated American writers to the *Série Noire* and how the translated texts were conditioned by the expectations of the French detective novel literary field, including competition from "Un Mystère" series. The study illustrates how translation impacts target-culture publishing practices. It also clearly illustrates that translation is omnipresent in the transfer process, for the translation imperative is felt not only in the target field, but also, and importantly, already in the source field. Furthermore, the translation paradigm is an inevitable element in the analysis of contacts between literary systems. Determinants are found in both the source and the target fields, even if source and target determinants differ. Gouanvic fortuitously nuances Godbout's assertion that what distinguishes the two disciplines is their object of study (Comparative Literature concentrating on translated literature and Translation Studies on the translation process and its effects), by affirming that what sets Translation Studies apart from Comparative Literature is the former's interest in the transfer process: what (the object of transfer), how (the mechanics of transfer), when (the history of transfer), where (the context of transfer), who (the agents involved in the transfer process).

Importantly, Gouanvic asks two questions that bring us a step closer to coming to terms with the fundamental differences between Comparative Literature and Translation Studies: is it within the purview of Comparative Literature to consider the interlinguistic transfer of meaning from the source field to the target field? Does Comparative Literature use the same instruments as Translation Studies to come to terms with meaning? If the answer to these questions is no, then conflating the disciplines would deny their respective specificity and the

knowledge that their specificity brings to light. Gouanvic argues that the potential of sociological Translation Studies lies in its interest in what happens in both the source and target fields and revolves around the question: what motivates the decision to translate? In the end, one can wonder if, in fact, one of the disciplines encompasses the other. Or one can accept that they simply co-exist, while recognizing that from an institutional point of view they may not enjoy the same symbolic capital. As for the future of the disciplines, Gouanvic emphasises the importance of grounding Translation Studies in social practice and including the translation paradigm in analyses of inter-literary contacts.

Lieven D'hulst's study, "Traduction et transfert : pour une démarche intégrée," adds a third discipline to the disciplinary pot, Transfer Studies, that enriches the debate as well as augmenting possibilities for interdisciplinary encounters. For example, D'hulst argues that Itamar Even-Zohar and Rachel Weissbrod have made productive use of a methodology common to Transfer Studies and Translation Studies. Indeed, he observes that Transfer Studies presents Translation Studies and Comparative Literature as homogeneous disciplines with their respective methods and objects, whereas an opposing trend reduces translation to a metaphor of transfer. Instead of bridging the gap separating Translation Studies and Comparative Literature, these developments raise an array of theoretical, methodological and analytical issues. The author responds by proposing an integrated approach in which the concept of "transfer," which is defined as a process of interaction between literary systems, their subsystems and their communication models, be linked to the concept of "translation." He even suggests that Transfer Studies might encompass translation, imitation, publishing, and so on. Gouanvic's sociological study of the transfer of translated literature from the source field to the target field illustrates that linking the concept of literary transfer and the concept of translation can be highly productive, although he does not address the issue of Transfer Studies. D'hulst's study of the transfer of Flemish popular songs in Northern France as the result of the nineteenth-century migration of Flemish workers and their families confirms the rich potential of this approach.

By contrast to Nichols' conflation of comparative studies and literary Translation Studies, D'hulst refers more positively to recent attempts to redefine the relationship between Comparative Literature and Translation Studies. He advises taking a step back when considering the concepts of progress, turn, decline or crisis in Comparative Literature or in Translation Studies in order to see the "big picture" and to look for ways to understand the internal logic of the evolution of the interdisciplinary relationship. One means to achieve a better understanding of the relationship would be to write its history that could reveal unexpected information about it. Historiographers will have to choose among an assortment of discursive and institutional questions when they undertake the task. As a starting point, D'hulst suggests that they ask the following questions: are Translation Studies at the heart of (or in the margins of) Comparative Literature? And if so, since when and why? He concludes by wondering whether the complexity of the issue could explain the dearth of candidates ready to take up the challenge of writing a bona fide historiographical study. Yet, in the Canadian context at least, I believe that we see a glimmer of hope in a number of the contributions to this issue and in the work undertaken by colleagues at the University of Alberta 20-odd years ago. Could their work spark an interest in documenting the history of and between the two disciplines in Canada?

The final contribution to the collection takes a fundamentally different approach to the previous ones, yet its author touches on the arguments advanced by her fellow contributors. For Gillian Lane-Mercier, in "Repenser les rapports entre la littérature comparée et la traductologie : prolégomènes au braconnage interdisciplinaire," one of the unexpected, and ironic, effects of the crisis in Comparative Literature was the birth of Translation Studies. As is the lot of interdisciplines whose respective identities mutate in keeping with interdisciplinary influences, they are both precarious, apparently perpetually in crisis, as they continue to jostle for recognition, although it would appear that in the United States at least, Translation Studies has usurped the traditional position of Comparative Literature in the university institution. Whether Translation Studies be considered at the heart of Comparative Literature (Apter) or Comparative Literature at the heart of Translation Studies (Gentzler),

conflating the disciplines is artificial, if disciplinary autonomy is determined by the questions asked rather than by the object of study. Lane-Mercier astutely argues that comparatists are free to compare two texts that have no prior link, while Koustas has shown us the reductionism that may result from such approaches. By contrast, in Translation Studies there is always a link of some kind between the source text and the target text, and the objective is often to determine how the link was created and the results of the link. Despite the distinctness of the interdisciplines, there is considerable cross-fertilisation between the two through territorial border crossing, as well as the generation of feelings of divided loyalties. Lane-Mercier refers to Philip Statford's metaphor of the translator as "smuggler of literary products." To him, the translator is a "hard-bitten comparatist" residing in a "rather barren and forbidding" "border country." Yet what Canadian comparatists tend to lose sight of is the objective of their discipline, which is to refute "the logic of universalism," to use Blodgett's words. Nichols has already shown us that the "logic of universalism" and the tendency to appropriation still very much mark the relationship between Canada's dominant literary system (the translation target system) and Canada's minority systems, taking as a case in point the Acadian system (Herménégilde Chiasson in translation).

In the end, interdisciplinary wrangling can be stimulating and productive, as Lane-Mercier convincingly argues by referring to Simon Harel's concept of "poaching" (*braconnage*), developed in *Braconnages identitaires. Un Québec palimpseste* (2006). If, in fact, Translation Studies has made an incursion into the territory of Comparative Literature, in the United States at least, Lane-Mercier hopes that this violent act will prove salutary and that the reaction of Comparative Literature will not be long in coming. Since poaching can spark creative and productive confrontation, it is to be hoped that the poaching between the neighbouring and contiguous disciplines of Translation Studies and Comparative Literature will generate new plurilingual and multicultural as well as intra- and international paradigms, in addition to new practices. On a very positive note, it would appear that D'hulst's and Meylarets' theorising has done just that. Specifically, the latter's "new comparatism" brings the best of Translation Studies

to comparatism. In a dialectical movement, a reaction from Comparative Literature should be forthcoming. Rather than signalling dispersion and fragility, territorial disputes can result in a fundamentally healthy and positive recognition of heterogeneity. This example demonstrates that interdisciplinary confrontation does not seek to level out difference. On the contrary, it reveals power struggles marked by conflict, disagreements and, yes, poaching. Lane-Mercier confirms what D'hulst has shown in his analysis of convergences that link and divergences that distinguish Transfer, Comparative and Translation Studies: methodological appropriations, as innovative—and irritating—as they may be, contribute to building interdisciplinary relationships based on dialogue.

UNIVERSITÉ DE MONCTON

References

APTER, Emily (2006). *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

BLODGETT, E. D. and A. G. PURDY, eds. (1988). *Problems of Literary Reception/Problèmes de réception littéraire*. Edmonton, University of Alberta.

D'HULST, Lieven (2007). "Comparative Literature versus Translation Studies: Close Encounters of the Third Kind?" *European Review*, 15, 1, pp. 95-104.

GOUANVIC, Jean-Marc (2006). "Au-delà de la pensée binaire en traductologie : esquisse d'une analyse sociologique des positions traductives en traduction littéraire." *TTR*, 19, 1, pp. 123-134.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty (2003). *Death of a Discipline*. New York, Columbia University Press.